

LAUGHING

Do you make jokes when things go wrong? Congratulations if you do, because joking is a great coping tool. Not only does it help you laugh instead of cry, it actually helps you solve problems. To understand why, you need to understand the anatomy of a problem.

PROBING A PROBLEM

Problems come in many varieties. But if you strip away the details, most problems have several things in common.

1. Stuckness³

When you're in the middle of a problem, you feel stuck — as if you've backed yourself into a corner and there's no way out. There are solutions out there, but you can't see them. You don't even believe they're there.

Laughter is a great unsticker. It takes your mind off the problem. It relaxes you. It opens you up to new ideas. When you return to a problem after a laugh break, ideas for solutions usually come more easily.

2. Out of Gas⁴

Problems steal your mental gasoline: they sap your energy; they dry up your enthusiasm; they kill your willingness to take a risk and look for solutions.

Laughter gives you energy. It revs up your enthusiasm. It makes you willing to take risks. It fills your mental gas tank so you've got fuel to tackle problems.

3. Impatience

Every task requires time. It's when tasks don't fit the time you've allotted that you've got a problem. For example:

"I was working on the transmission of my car. I thought I could fix it in an hour. But when it wasn't done after an hour-and-a-half, I got angry. Probably if I'd realized it would take longer than an hour I wouldn't have cracked it when I threw the wrench at it."

This fellow needed a laugh break! Laughing helps you relax and see a problem in perspective. With a little laughter, he might have realized his expectation was wrong and set aside more time for working on the car.

"If you're going to tell people the truth, you better make them laugh. Otherwise they'll kill you."

4. Mental Tightness

The longer you work on a problem, the harder it gets. That's because as you get frustrated, you tighten up your thinking. You stop letting your mind wander loosely through all the possible solutions.

Laughter lets your mind relax. It makes you open to new ideas so you can find solutions.

So add laughter to your list of Mentally Tough tools. When you're feeling tense, angry, nervous or frustrated — in other words, when you're in High or Low Negative — laugh! Laughter can zip you right over to the positive side so you'll be ready for the next challenge.

LAUGHING: THE EASIEST FORM OF EXERCISE

Laughing doesn't *seem* like exercise. You don't work up a sweat from laughing, and you don't hear of medals going to World Class Laughers. But, in fact, laughter is a lot like exercise — as least as far as your body is concerned. That's why it has the power to relax and energize you.

THE OXYGEN CONNECTION

Exercise energizes because it forces you to breathe deeply. Deep breathing mean lots of oxygen enters your body, and lots of oxygen means energy for your brain. The same is true for laughing. Next time you laugh, notice what happens to your breathing. You'll find you can't laugh for more than a few seconds without taking a deep breath. That sends oxygen to your brain, and your brain feels energized.

Those same deep breaths also relax you. Remember the experiment in which you made yourself relax by breathing deeply for two minutes? The same thing happens when you laugh. The deep breaths that come with laughter produce the same feelings of relaxation.

THE MUSCLE CONNECTION

Go for a run when you're feeling tense and the odds are 90-1 you'll come back feeling better because exercise releases tension in your muscles and your mind. When you laugh exactly the same thing happens. You're feeling tense, so your muscles are tight. But the minute you start to laugh, all your muscles relax. That's why people "double up" with laughter: their muscles are so relaxed they can barely hold themselves up. As your muscles relax, so does your mind. Tension goes away.

THE NEUROTRANSMITTER CONNECTION

There's probably a third way laughing is like exercise, although scientists are not sure. We know that when you exercise, your body releases norepinephrine, endorphins and serotonin. Norepinephrine gives you energy; endorphins make you happy; and serotonin helps you relax. Some scientists believe these three neurotransmitters are also released by a good hearty laugh.

Hopi and Pueblo Indians used medicine men to provoke laughter. The men wore strange outfits and did outrageous behaviors to get people to laugh. Tribal leaders knew that regular laughter would keep tribal members healthy and help the tribal councils make sound decisions.

Laugh when I'm in a bad mood?
What am I supposed to do — tell myself
a joke?

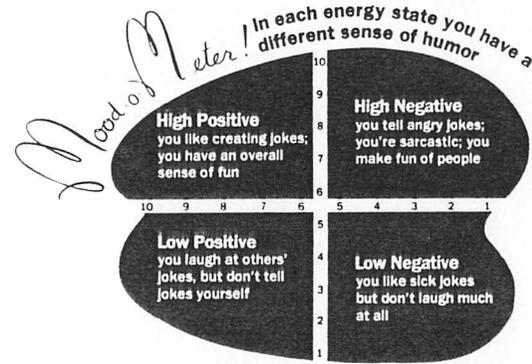
Exactly. It isn't as silly as it sounds. Lots of people keep photos or trinkets around to look at during the day. Looking at them makes them feel good. Telling yourself a joke is no different. It's just a private "energy reserve" you keep to use when you need it.

In fact, we recommend that you not just tell yourself *one* joke, because even great jokes get old. Keep a supply of jokes on hand, and change them frequently so they're always fresh. Here are some tips for how you can keep a supply of jokes within easy reach:

1. Start cutting cartoons from the newspaper. Every time you see one you like, cut it out and slip it in one of your notebooks. Keep cutting them out until you have at least one per class. Then start replacing them so they're always fresh.
2. While you're at it, put cartoons up where you do your homework.
3. When you hear a joke you like, write it down. Put it in your wallet so you'll always have it when you need it.
4. Trade jokes with friends. That will keep everyone's supply up, and the more you tell jokes, the more energized you'll feel.
5. In between classes, get together with friends and tell jokes in the hall. Do this

Ever wonder why there are so many "sit-coms" on TV in the evening? It's because millions of Americans want to relax after a hard day's work, and the folks who schedule TV shows know just how to do it: make 'em laugh!

Why does Arsenio Hall always start his show off with jokes? Because listening to jokes puts people in High or Low Positive. It makes you relaxed, mellow and receptive to whatever comes next. Keep that in mind next time you need to have a "serious" talk with someone. A joke or two at the beginning might improve your chances of getting what you want.



especially before a test, or a difficult class or a class that's tough to stay awake in.

6. Think of someone you know who can almost always make you laugh. Go talk to him or her before a difficult challenge.

7. Create a video library of comedy tapes. Get Bill Cosby, Robin Williams or Steven Wright tapes and watch a few minutes every day. When possible, watch them before a big performance.

8. Try to find something funny in a painful situation every day. Get friends to help you. Remember, the more you laugh, the less painful the problem will seem.

9. Put a cartoon over your bed so it's the first thing you see in the morning. If you can start the day with a laugh you'll start relaxed, energized and ready for fun. Chances are, everything that follows will be easier to handle.

SARCASM VS. MIRTH

There are really two kinds of humor: mirth and sarcasm. Mirth is lighthearted, positive humor — upbeat jokes that get everybody laughing. Sarcasm is downbeat, negative humor — sick jokes that get people laughing for a moment but then leave them feeling depressed or angry. While mirth sends you into High or Low Positive, sarcasm puts you in High or Low Negative.

• **LAUGHTER ELIMINATES TENSION.** It helps you relax so you can start working on solutions.

• **LAUGHTER GIVES YOU ENERGY** so you've got the power to find solutions.

• **LAUGHTER MAKES YOU OPEN TO NEW IDEAS** so you can see the solution when it comes.

• **LAUGHTER PUTS THE PROBLEM IN PERSPECTIVE.** It stops you from taking it (and yourself) too seriously.